

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Editorial Note

Bergholm, Alexandra

2019

Bergholm , A 2019 , ' Editorial Note ' , Temenos : Nordic journal of comparative religion , vol. 55 , no. 1 , pp. 5-7 . <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.83430>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/311690>

<https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.83430>

cc_by_nc_nd

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Editorial Note

For several years the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh has hosted an annual colloquium on 'Thinking about Mythology in the 21st Century'. The event owes its origin to the enthusiasm of Dr Emily Lyle, whose aim from the beginning has been to bring together scholars interested in critically examining the mythologies of the Indo-European cultural world from different perspectives. In 2017 an initiative was taken to focus the scope of the colloquium on Celtic and Scandinavian mythology, and with the active input of the Department of Scandinavian Studies the first gathering with over thirty speakers was held in November.

This special issue of *Temenos* includes a selection of papers from that successful event, representing a range of theoretical and critical perspectives that are current in the study of Celtic and Scandinavian mythology today. The comparisons drawn between the two traditions by the individual authors elucidate both the thematic similarities in the materials under investigation and the broader methodological issues pertinent to the interpretation and analysis of data relating to pre-Christian belief systems.

In the opening article Jonathan Wooding considers the relationship between archaeology and myth especially from the perspective of Celtic-speaking cultures. With a number of case studies Wooding illustrates how the various appropriations of 'myth' in archaeological research have shaped perceptions of history and ethnic identity in both academic and public discourse. His critical examination adds nuance to the view that the study of myth and material culture represents two mutually exclusive forms of knowledge, and highlights several points of convergence where the two subjects can be brought into dialogue by moving beyond the problematic presuppositions of previous scholarship.

The relationship between myth and materiality is also addressed in the contribution by Sara Ann Knutson, who offers an innovative reading of Old Norse myths from the perspective of contemporary material culture studies. Knutson's theoretical approach draws on the recent 'material turn' in historical and literary disciplines, which has explored the 'social lives' of objects and their role in mediating and negotiating cultural interactions. She argues that in Old Norse mythology, too, particular physical objects can be viewed as having active agency that defines their special status. The themes of manufacture, ownership, exchange, and utility that feature in the depiction of these objects in the mythical narratives also provide an insight

into the lived reality of Iron Age peoples, reflecting the ways in which this 'mythical materiality' is rooted in the mundane world.

Jonas Wellendorf's article explores the medieval Christian authors' attitudes towards the pre-Christian past by offering an insightful comparative analysis of Oddr munkr's late-twelfth century *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* and the contemporary Middle Irish tale *Acallam na Senórach*. While the comparison reveals certain shared features in the two stories, it even more importantly underscores the different narrative strategies that the authors and compilers of these works have employed in reframing the pagan traditions. From this perspective his discussion accentuates the importance of reading the medieval literary sources as products of particular historical and cultural circumstances, in which the earlier traditions were continuously re-shaped by specific agendas of harmonising, demonising, or historicising the pagan past.

The thematic similarities between Scandinavian and Irish materials also serve as a starting point for Felix Lummer's contribution, which re-evaluates the question of the possible Irish origin of an Old Norse literary character Guðmundr á Glasisvøllum. Lummer presents an overview of the relevant literary and folklore sources to argue that many of the parallels that have been used to support this hypothesis are more tenuous than has previously been acknowledged. Since many of the central mythological motifs relating to the Guðmundr narrative complex are ubiquitous in Scandinavian folklore and in folk tales more broadly, he suggests that their occurrence in the sagas can be explained without positing a direct borrowing or influence between Irish and Norse traditions.

John Shaw brings the approach of Indo-European comparative mythology to bear on two divine figures, the ruler of the Irish mythical race Tuatha Dé, the Dagda, and the Scandinavian god Thor. Shaw examines the shared qualities of these deities by relating their stories to the international tale type ATU1148B 'The Thunder Instrument', with particular emphasis on the role of both gods as defenders of the cosmic order against monstrous adversaries. With the help of the wider mythological framework Shaw proposes a sequence for the evolution and development of these traditions, tracing their origins to a celestial god whose traits and attributes are widely attested across the Indo-European cultural area.

The figure of Thor is also the focus of Emily Lyle, who similarly employs a comparative perspective in her analysis of Old Norse mythology. Lyle's interpretation of this body of material is based on a cosmological approach to the study of Indo-European myth, which she has developed in a number

of publications in recent decades. This schematic model views myths and cosmology as a system in which social organisation correlates with elements of space and time in a more complex manner than the Dumézilian functional theory assumed. Her analysis illustrates how such an approach can shed light on the cosmic ideas that may have been retained in the Old Norse stories, even if they are no longer discernible on the surface.

The concluding article by Adam Dahmer discusses the use of Germanic runic symbolism in the celebrations of modern Beltane festivals. His primary interest is to investigate how and why the runes have gained such a prominent position in the ritual and artistic setting of the festival, and whether, given the use of the same symbols in the ethnonationalistic iconography of the far right, their adoption by the Beltaners should be seen as socio-politically problematic. Dahmer's contribution raises a number of important questions relating to issues of cultural appropriation, historical accuracy, and ideological meaning-making that demonstrate why the study of mythology remains topical today.

I wish to thank all the authors for their contributions to this issue, and Dr Triin Laidoner and the editor-in-chief Måns Broo for their help in seeing it through to publication. I would also like to extend my personal thanks to all the anonymous reviewers of the individual articles, whose role in this process has been invaluable.

Alexandra Bergholm
Guest Editor

